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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the work of the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group, which met over the course of the 1998-99 school year. Based on the personal experiences of the group's facilitator, the paper presents thoughts about family literacy and the relationship between families, literacy, and programs. In an effort to support family literacy program development, this paper focuses on the learning that occurs between parents and children in the home, the particular role the adult experience plays in a child's development, and the ways in which programs can develop and support that learning. (Author/VWL)

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Building Bridges: Home Learning and Family Literacy Programs

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Finally, I am grateful to Susan Henry from the New York State Department of Education and the members of the Downstate Even Start Committee for recognizing the importance of professional development and contributing financial support to this project.

But still the bridge that the child trusts or delights in — and in my case, the book that will take children from where they are to where they might be — needs to be made not from synthetic or inanimate objects but from the stuff of life.

Katherine Paterson,
Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Introduction

This paper describes the work of the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group which met over the course of the 1998-1999 school year. Based on my experiences both as the group's facilitator and as a participant in its conversations, this paper represents my thoughts about family literacy and the relationship between families, literacy, and programs. In an effort to support family literacy program development, this paper attempts to focus attention on the learning that occurs between parents and children in the home, the particular role the adult experience plays in a child's development, and the ways in which programs can develop and support that learning.

Background

Designed to offer early childhood education, adult literacy, and parenting education through a model of integrated services, Even Start Family Literacy Partnerships aim to support parents as they become partners with schools in the education of young children. Even Start Family Literacy Partnerships, representing school districts and community-based organizations, are federally funded and exist throughout the United States. These programs have in common the integrated and intergenerational components of Even Start. However, the ways in which programs are designed and implemented differ. While some Even Start programs offer services through a variety of service providers in the community, others locate the provision of services at a single site. Moreover, Even Start programs work with families through a range and mixture of center and home-based services (Dwyer, 1995).

Representing the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, The City University of New York, I have been involved in an Even Start Family Literacy Partnership with Community School District Seven in the South Bronx for six years. This partnership, the Family Literacy Involvement Through Education (FLITE) Even Start program, began as a primarily home-based program integrating early childhood and adult education through regular home visits to families. As families' needs have evolved, the FLITE Even Start

program has become increasingly center-based offering early childhood, parenting, basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and a range of elective classes. My work with the FLITE Even Start program has focused, in part, on supporting the professional development of staff as they explore issues related to literacy, teaching, and learning. My interest in helping practitioners understand the nature of their work with families has grown as "family literacy" becomes an increasingly common phrase used in local and national conversations about children's readiness for and success in school. As a result of wondering how my Even Start colleagues defined family literacy in these conversations, I formed the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group, consisting of representatives from seven programs, as a place where practitioners could identify, articulate and, question their understandings of family literacy work.

Ways of Working

Supported by the New York State Department of Education through the Downstate Even Start Committee, the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group represented several New York City Even Start programs and was comprised of family workers, program coordinators, and a social worker. Programs participating in the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group included the Highbridge, Parents as Partners, FLITE, Project Reach Youth, Project Get Ahead, and Port Chester Even Start programs.[1] Designed to bring a range of Even Start staff together, the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group sought to uncover the group's thinking about family literacy by placing their individual experiences and work next to each other and to ideas in the larger field.

We entered conversations about family literacy by telling stories about our own experiences. Some of these stories focused on the nature of literacy in our homes when we were growing up; other stories we shared described times in our lives when we were involved with a parent in a particular piece of work or activity. By doing this sharing, we connected our experiences with those of others in the group and, by extension, we were able to imagine connections between our lives and the lives of our program participants. In order to link our experiences with larger ideas, we placed our recollections and descriptions of our work next to readings from the field which included: *Reconstructing Teacher Views on Parent Involvement in Children's Literacy* (Cairney and Ruge, 1997); *Which Way for Family Literacy: Intervention or Empowerment?* (Auerbach, 1995); and *Literacy from Within: The Project FIEL Curriculum* (Huerta-Macias, 1995).

In an early meeting of the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group, a group member shared her understanding of a bridge as metaphor when she noted that everyone on the

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[1] 1. Participants in the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group included Maddy Centeno, Paulette Coleman, Helen Crespo, Susan Gitlitz, Rita Magier, Heddy Mills, Gloria Ortiz, Maria Elsie Quiala, and Wendy Rose Sanchez.

bridge between home and school "is walking in one direction, from the school to the home." This observation established a foundation for our exploration of family literacy as we considered the assumptions and beliefs underlying possible partnerships between families and schools. What is the role of the family and the place of the home in the building of the bridge if the planks are laid by the school? In reaching out to the home, how can schools include families to support children's learning in genuine and meaningful ways? Ideas concerning the relations of home and school and parents and children surfaced throughout the five meetings of the study group during the 1998-1999 school year.

This paper will describe the work of the study group, explore the issues and questions raised within it, and discuss implications for family literacy programs.

Our Stories: Literacy and the Family

We began our study into the nature of family literacy with the image of people walking on a bridge as a metaphor for the relationship between the home and school. Inasmuch as a bridge spans a chasm, it brings together entities which otherwise stand apart. A bridge represents a joining, a way of filling and, perhaps, crossing over a gap. Bridges also provide for a back and forth of movement. In her 1978 Newbery Award acceptance speech, Paterson speaks of bridges in terms of children moving forward. She cautions us, however, that the bridge involved in moving children to new places is built from "the stuff of life"; the bridge is built from the experiences and understandings children bring with them as they journey forward.

The call for family-school partnerships is not new. It is difficult to argue with the idea that children's learning can be supported best by the collaborative efforts of the home, the school and the community. It is essential, however, to explore what is meant when family literacy is placed at the heart of these efforts. If the bridge extends from the school to the home, family literacy becomes a function of school literacy and the family an instrument of the school. Considering this as an often held model of family-school partnership, a study group member noted how easily our Even Start work can be based on the "assumption that nothing is going on in the home. We need to view our work as adding to what [families] have."

What *do* families have? Our stories about literacy in our own childhood homes revealed a variety of ways in which literacy lives in the experiences of families. We identified story telling, letter writing, newspapers, comics, magazines, the Bible, television, and radio as vehicles for literacy learning. In one home, literacy was present in the form of letters written by a mother and a grandmother which began "Dear _____, How are you? I am fine" and continued with the "meat" of their lives. In another home, literacy was found in the stories a mother told about the people in her neighborhood. Literacy existed in the books a

father brought home from the garbage of the building in which he worked as superintendent. Literacy was present in the stories told by a grandmother about the generations that came before her in Puerto Rico. Literacy was present in the different people in our homes. It existed in the non-formal experiences of our families' daily lives. These experiences of the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group members are not unique; they are mirrored in several studies of family and community literacy. In *Ways With Words*, for example, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) explores the nature of talk in the homes of families from the Trackton and Roadville communities in the Piedmont Carolinas. Taylor and Strickland (1989) speak of "moment to moment literacy experiences" when they refer to the various uses for print in homes which "take place as parents and children go about their daily lives."

We are living in a time when the performance of schools and the abilities of children often are watched with great scrutiny through narrow lenses; society often evaluates learning and literacy as a series of skills isolated from student experiences. Something isn't working, we are told; many of our families hear the message that their children are failing and that the parents, in turn, are failing their children. An outgrowth of this concern for children to succeed in school is, as one study group member pointed out, a push for parents to "do school-like literacy activities in their home as a way of preparing themselves and their children for school success." Such is the press and the power of the message which engages the support of the very people it is blaming that one mother turned her dining room into a classroom, complete with blackboard and desk. While there is little doubt that parent-child reading experiences in the home contribute to a child's later success as a reader (Teale, 1984), these literacy experiences at times emerge from or respond to the natural rhythms of family life (Taylor and Strickland, 1989). In an effort to recognize and build upon these experiences, it is important to ask, what happens to the literacy of the day- to-day, to the non-formal fabric of family when we bring into homes the specificity of a school-based agenda for literacy?

Our Stories : Work of the Family

In order to explore further the nature of parent-child time in family literacy programming, we again turned our attention to the study group members as we described times when we were involved with our parents in a particular piece of work, project or activity. Central to these recollections was the fact that our experiences focused on, or emerged from, the adult's interest or work. One study group member told the story of accompanying her father to his second job:

> When I was young my father made extra money cleaning offices in New Jersey. The family would go on weekends with him to help. In the back of the building, there was a little piece of land where they allowed him to plant

> a garden. He made the garden from scratch and the family would help him with weeding. We worked with our hands, without any tools. It was nice to see the tomatoes come up and to have a place outside of all the stuff going on in the home.

Another study group member recalled making and collating copies of papers for conferences her parents attended. She noted, "my brother and I would race to do this...at the conference we would hand out the papers to the people who came." These stories illustrate the value of the adult's work in the life of the family. They also reflect the sense of "joining with" that Lillian Weber (1991) speaks about when describing the relationship between children and parents in the home:

> It is clear that in contexts away from the classroom, though there is telling, there is an addition to the being-told. The adults are busy about their own tasks and the children live in this world of adult work, observe the use of the materials of the world by the adults, and "join with" the adults who, for their own purposes, use these materials. The adults may stop briefly to comment on a child's trials of what works or to 'tell' what is needed to make it work. What is amazing is that, thought the brief bits children are told, most of the time, are only minimum details, without any expectation from those doing the 'telling' of testing or standard, they seem nevertheless to be enough to support children with their own searches for greater detail and understanding. Why the 'telling' is of brief bits and minimal is clear. In the usual situation the adult is busy about his own uses and investigations, so telling or demonstration is most usually brief, although repeated as needed. Observation, following-after, trials, autonomously-selected bits or reconstructions of what the child thinks will work within his/her frame of concentrated focus are the major processes of learning as I've observed them.

When we consider the relationship between children and parents, we come to understand family literacy as greater than either the knowledge in the home or the knowledge brought into the homes by the school. We understand that families have ways of working and that learning takes place within those ways of working. As Weber indicates, these ways of working often center on an adult task and include the child as he or she supports the adult in carrying out the work of that particular task. The idea of a child "joining with" an adult in the adult's work differs from commonly held notions about parent-child activities in family literacy programs. Parent-child activities in family literacy programs often center around the child as the context for learning; and, these activities often are developed from the "assumption that children succeed because their parents do specific school-like tasks with them" (Auerbach, 1995). From this particular vantage point, the value of the adult's work in the home and the ways of working shared between parents and children are obscured; and, as one study group member reminded us, "it's the participants' day-to-day

and life time experiences that get overlooked." These daily experiences can provide much of the foundation for literacy learning and development. As Denny Taylor (1983) reminds us in her study of literacy activities in six families, "literacy is deeply embedded in the social processes of family life and is not some specific list of activities added to the family agenda to explicitly teach reading."

Readings: Other Voices

One way of coming to understand the meaning of family literacy in our work with Even Start families is to place our experiences with family literacy next to ideas in the field. Our own stories of literacy and family served as an entry point and a backdrop for our discussions of the articles we read in the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group. I selected *Reconstructing Teacher Views on Parent Involvement in Children's Literacy* by Cairney and Ruge for the group to read as a way of placing our recollections of home literacy experiences in the context of the home-school relationship. When responses to this article pointed toward tensions existing at some Even Start programs between the work of programs, the lives of families, and the expectations of schools, I introduced Elsa Auerbach's *Which Way for Family Literacy: Intervention or Empowerment?* as a way of examining the assumptions and values related to working with families in family literacy programs. Our third and final reading, *Literacy from Within: The Project FIEL Curriculum* by Ana Huerta-Macias was recommended by a study group member in response to the group's increasing awareness of the important role adult education and experiences can play in developing family literacy programs.

These articles gave the study group a basis for thinking about the relationship between the home and the school in terms of how parent support is perceived and defined. As Auerbach reminds us in *Which Way for Family Literacy: Intervention or Empowerment?*, working with families' strengths, interests and issues as a foundation for learning does not necessarily resemble school-based learning. Perhaps this is why, as one group member noted in response to Cairney and Ruge, "parents don't see in themselves their ability to be their child's first teacher. They do it every day, but they don't see it." Embedded in this notion of parents as teachers are ideas about what it means to educate. If teaching and learning are seen solely in the context of a "school-based learning agenda" (Cairney and Ruge, 1997), then the possibilities for the place of the day-to-day lives of parents and children in partnership with schools become limited. If we understand literacy as "a set of social practices that range according to cultures, contexts, purposes, and participants" (Auerbach, 1996), and if we consider teaching to involve seeing and understanding the child, then parental involvement in children's literacy development can move beyond simply supporting classroom work at home.

Article reading invited the study group to consider the relationship between parents and

teachers or family workers, as a peer relationship, a relationship in which teaching becomes a joint endeavor based on the knowledge and experience particular to homes and schools. In describing her role as a family worker with an Even Start program, one study group member stressed the importance of how family workers present themselves to families and spoke of making deliberate distinctions between herself and a teacher. Seeing herself as working with families "from where they are", this study group member echoed ideas presented by Huerta-Macias in describing ways of using adult experiences to shape parent-child activities. Despite efforts in Even Start programs to create larger, more balanced perspectives of learning, another study group member commented on the tension felt by herself and family workers in her program as they seek to connect the home and the school: "You have to keep looking and seeing what's happening in families. Then you feel frustrated because others want you to do it (work with parents and children) one way." The readings confirmed for the study group members the idea that "knowing both parent and child allows for a more effective relationship with the family." In order to support families as learners, program staff need to understand the knowledge, interests and experiences families bring with them to programs; in this way, staff can develop materials and approaches which, in keeping with the values of Even Start, "fit services to families, not families to program" (Dwyer, 1995).

Afterthoughts: Implications for Family Literacy Programs

In exploring issues related to the role of the adult in home learning, the ways in which family literacy programs perceive that role, and the relationship between home and school learning, the work of the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group raised fundamental questions for work with families. How can our work support the real experiences of parents and children and make them evident to larger school communities? How can we work in ways which create room for the learning and work already present in families? How can we validate that work? While these questions are not answered easily, they position us to understand the work of family literacy as larger than school literacy. They ask us to consider the family as a place where particular learning occurs, where the work of the adult is central to the daily experiences of family life, and where meaning emerges from the relationship between parent and child as they go about the talking, reading, and writing of their day-to-day work.

Family literacy programs, and Even Start community-school partnerships in particular, are in a unique position. Aiming to support literacy development in families, family literacy programs can enter conversations about children and their readiness for school by re-imagining the possibilities for working with parents and children together. Speaking to this relationship in families, Lillian Weber (1997) reminds us that

> What is <u>not</u> discussed is how the parent role in school relates to the

inextricable relationships of parents with children. Taking account of parents in that way necessitates giving them credit for input to the child that the teacher then builds on. It means demanding a parental role of transmitting to the teacher the contribution to the child's development that is inevitably carried out at home.

As Weber suggests, and as the stories of the Even Start Family Literacy Study Group reveal, the adult role in the home is central to the development of children. As such, it is a role which offers great possibility to the idea of parents, program staff, or parents and school staff, working together in real and meaningful ways to support children's learning.

In *Ways With Words*, Heath (1983) describes a variety of ways in which teachers developed school skills with children based on their home experiences. For example, Heath speaks specifically of teachers modifying classroom materials based on the methods of questioning found in the children's homes. She also describes a first-grade teacher who maps the children's community noting street lights, signs, and stores; the teacher then used this information as a way for children to search their neighborhoods for particular letters.

Another example of how parents, programs, and schools can join together is through the Primary Language Record, an observation-based assessment of children's talking, listening, reading and writing; through discussions with teachers, the Primary Language Record offers parents the opportunity to contribute their understandings of their child's literacy learning to the school. Similarly, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation developed an interview asking for parents' perceptions of early childhood and early childhood education. These examples represent just a few of the ways in which home-based events and ideas can inform the work of programs and schools.

It is not enough to declare parents as their children's first teachers without pausing to understand the natural teaching and learning occurring in the context of the lives of families. This teaching and learning often is located in the ways in which families work, in the habits, routines, and rhythms which develop as children work alongside their parents. In asking parents to join as partners in children's education, family literacy programs and schools need to consider ways of identifying and incorporating the experiences a child brings from the home to the classroom so that bridges between homes and schools can be built from the lives of children.

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